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### E. Kentucky's future hinges on altering relationship with coal

TOM EBLEN HERALD-LEADER COLUMNIST

HAZARD - The keynote speaker at the 22nd annual East **Kentucky** Leadership Conference was Ron Eller, a leading authority on the history of modern Appalachia. The University of **Kentucky** history professor also was given the East **Kentucky** Leadership Foundation's annual "private individual" award, which comes with a beautiful, handmade wooden chair.

By the time Eller finished speaking Thursday evening, I suspect many in the audience of 250 were ready to break the chair over his head.

Eller, an eighth-generation Appalachian who was the first member of his family to go to college, said the region will never catch up with the rest of the nation economically as long as it is defined by industries that abusively extract natural resources, especially the dwindling supply of coal.

"We must begin, I think, by abolishing surface mining, including the radically destructive practice of mountaintop removal," Eller said. "Mountaintop removal isn't necessary to the region or to the national economy. It's just cheaper.

"We can continue to mine coal, gas and other mineral resources. But the impact of extraction on the land, on our water resources, on our forest resources and other sensitive ecosystems must be strictly regulated and enforced. In the long run, we will have to move away from an extractive economy, especially one based upon coal."

The final speaker of the two-day conference at Hazard Community and Technical College was House Speaker Greg Stumbo, a Prestonsburg Democrat who serves on the board of a coal company. He revised his planned remarks to respond to Eller.

Some of what Stumbo said was defensive: Why do people who no longer live in the mountains think they know what's best for them? Subdivisions built on Lexington farmland are just as bad for the environment as surface mining in the mountains.

Some of it was matter of fact: We must move beyond coal, which will eventually be gone. We also must understand that coal produces half the nation's electricity - and more than 90 percent of **Kentucky's** electricity - and nothing can change that any time soon.

And some of what Stumbo said was new and interesting: Rather than abolish surface mining, which he said isn't economically practical, leaders in Eastern **Kentucky** must become more creative and demanding about how mined land is reclaimed and reused.

Stumbo cited several examples where mined land has been turned into airports, subdivisions, parks, golf courses and commercial development. But he also acknowledged that much other mined land has been poorly reclaimed as useless "pasture."

Stumbo said he has begun talking with Gov. Steve Beshear about creating a state master plan for engaging landowners, regulators and community leaders to require better plans for post-mining use before land can be mined. If done properly, he said, more mined land could become an asset for the region instead of a liability.

I've been attending the East **Kentucky** Leadership Conference off and on since 1998, and it gets more interesting every year. That's because the people who come seem more willing to discuss controversial subjects, question the way things have always been done and embrace new ideas.

A growing theme of the conference has been entrepreneurship and how digital technology could be harnessed to reduce the region's economic isolation. More leaders in Eastern **Kentucky** now understand that their economy won't be fixed by attracting big, outside employers so much as by educating and enabling creative, hard-working locals.

Jerry Rickett of the **Kentucky** Highlands Investment Corp., one of the oldest and most successful organizations working to develop home-grown businesses, noted that there are more than 82,000 "micro enterprises" in **Kentucky's** Appalachian counties. Imagine, he said, how many jobs could be created if some of those businesses could grow enough to hire just one more person?

Entrepreneurship and a more diverse economy are vital to Eastern **Kentucky's future**. But another key will be the willingness of the region's people to better manage their bittersweet, century-old relationship with the coal industry.

Kentuckians must find ways to make the coal industry a better environmental steward, community partner and contributor to the quality of life in the mountains - either by Eller's way, Stumbo's way or intelligent combinations of them both.

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